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FOUR YEARS OF SOCIALISTIC GOVERNMENT IN YUCATAN

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One of the inevitable results of the entry of the United States into the Great War was the shifting of the attention of the American public opinion from the issues of the New World to those of the Old. As a consequence our interest in the affairs of our neighbors south of the Rio Grande suffered a temporary eclipse. But now that the tension caused by the war has perceptibly slackened the Mexican situation has again become the object of careful and anxious scrutiny on the part of the American people. Questions whose answers no longer admit of delay obtrude themselves. How far has our confidence in the present administration in Mexico been justified? To what extent have the reforms—political, social, economic—heralded by the protagonists of the last revolution produced results? Have we any basis for the belief that Mexico is at length emerging from a welter of disorder to enter upon an era of orderly and peaceful development? A satisfactory answer to these queries would entail a survey of the whole Mexican situation and would transcend the scope of this article. But a certain side light on the larger problems may be gained through an attempt to summarize the results of the revolution in one of the most important and interesting sections of the Republic, the State of Yucatan.

Yucatan was swept into the revolutionary current early in 1915. At that time Carranza sent General Salvador Alvarado with several thousand soldiers to Yucatan to oust Governor Argumeno who shortly before had installed himself in the executive office by a clever coup d'etat. Alvarado was successful in his mission and was promptly appointed governor by Carranza. The new executive

proceeded at once to turn Yucatan into a vast experimental laboratory in which were tried out a comprehensive series of social and economic reforms. The isolation of Yucatan from the rest of Mexico, its almost complete immunity from revolutionary disturbances, the peculiar circumstance that its chief agricultural product—henequen—afforded an unceasing source of revenue, made it possible for these reforms to have a fair trial under exceptionally favorable conditions. Finally the Maya Indians, for generations the docile tools of the great henequen planters, furnished an unusually plastic and malleable material for the purpose of social experimentation.

A complete catalogue, much less a detailed discussion of the manifold accomplishments of Alvarado is impossible owing to lack of space; moreover they have received such wide publicity as to be well known to all those who have been following recent developments in Mexico. For the purpose of this study it will be sufficient to pass in review certain of Alvarado's achievements as a preliminary to a tentative appraisal of the actual results of his efforts to transform the very fabric of the state within the short compass of four years. A special effort will be made to ascertain to what extent the revolutionary government of Yucatan has succeeded in its attempt to raise, overnight as it were, the social and economic status of the hitherto neglected Maya Indians, who make up the great bulk of the population.

Alvarado was indoctrinated with certain socialistic teachings and he had no hesitancy on several occasions frankly to set the stamp of his socialistic credo on official acts of the government. Thus in the preamble to the famous "Ley del Trabajo" or law regulating conditions of labor enacted early in 1916, the statement was made

that if a declaration is necessary this government declares itself frankly socialistic in order to protect the weak, the unfortunate against the privileges, the abuses and the insolence of the powerful.

It is not surprising therefore that his zeal caused him to run the whole gamut of social and economic reforms. His multifarious activities embraced such diverse objects as the abolition of the debts of the peons and the distribution of land—an attempt in other words to solve the perennial agrarian problem—the abolition of the liquor traffic, the suppression of bull fights, lotteries and organized prostitution; the improvement of the lot of the laboring classes by the direct encouragement of the formation of unions, the creation of a Department of Labor, and the enactment of comprehensive labor legislation which included everything from an eight hour day and a minimum wage of two pesos to the creation of an elaborate machinery for the settlement of industrial disputes.

Governor Alvarado also professed an enthusiastic though somewhat naïve devotion to the cause of public education. His own account of his achievements in this field is worth quoting in part. Shortly before his term of office expired he declared

All the laws and systems of education have been reformed we have established schools in the country; in every village and settlement, whether ranch or farm, and we have increased considerably the number of primary schools; we have established agricultural schools, a school of arts and trades, a school of domestic science, a school of higher arts, and we have improved and enlarged the scope of the normal school, the commercial school One of the great works of the Revolution has been the creation of the "Ciudad Escolar de los Mayas," a normal school for teachers where only children of the Indian race will receive an education. The school is very much like the Tuskegee Institution Three of the four years' course are devoted to trade classes and the pupils are instructed in stock raising and in cultivating the land. All instruction is practical and there will soon be established carpenter shops, machine repair shops, iron works, etc. We shall also teach the pupils how to raise domestic animals and fowls with profit. They will have besides, an orchestra, a band, a newspaper, moving pictures, a telegraph, telephone and wireless system, and lecture halls for various sciences. It will be a city in itself and the principal aim will be to instill into the minds of

the students the idea that they are the new missionaries who have consecrated themselves to the saving of their brothers of the same race from the evils of ignorance, superstition and vice.

Truly a generous and noble aspiration for the uplift of an entire people.

Other features of this comprehensive plan of social education included one hundred public libraries (with plans for five hundred more), the publication and distribution of the works of Samuel Smiles and Orison Swett Marden, the encouragement of the feminist movement through the holding of two women's congresses, school savings-banks, boy scouts, school farms, and a wide variety of athletic sports and games. The governor pointed with pride to the fact that at the end of his term of office there were in Yucatan more teachers than soldiers.

We have 2300 teachers and only 500 soldiers. We spend 2,400,000 pesos in education which is 64 per cent of the general budget of the state.

Governor Alvarado's socialistic theories naturally led him to believe in the nationalization of industries and the control by the state of public utilities. To a certain extent both of these ideas have been realized. Thus the *Compañía de Fomento del Sureste*, a majority of whose stock is owned by the state government, controls the Yucatan railway system and the *Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequen* owns a line of steamers plying between New Orleans and Progreso. The *Comisión Reguladora del Comercio*, appointed by Governor Alvarado had for its object the importation from the United States of immense quantities of foodstuffs and their sale at a slight margin above cost. To promote local industries the government has invested nearly a million pesos in a plant for the making of twine and sacking from sisal hemp. And finally the crowning achievement of Governor Alvarado in the opinion of his admirers has been the creation of the famous *Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequen*, a coöperative organization which not only controls and markets the total

henequen output of Yucatan but is also an unfailing source of revenue to the government. A discussion of the origin and functions of this remarkable organization lies outside the scope of this article. As a quasi-monopoly it has naturally been the object of violent attack both in Mexico and the United States. American harvester companies in particular could hardly be expected to view with equanimity the doubling of the price of henequen, indispensable in the making of binder twine. The great henequen growers themselves, forced by Alvarado to enter the monopoly, were also dissatisfied. Although they gained a higher price for their products this surplus was frequently wiped out by increase in wages and taxes decreed by the government. As will be presently made clear the real beneficiaries of the monopoly were the government, which thus found means to carry out its projects, and the peons on the haciendas who enjoyed the higher wages.

In February, 1918, Alvarado's term of office came to an end and he was succeeded by Sr. Castro Morales, formerly director of the United Railways of Yucatan. While the new executive is in full accord with the program of the previous administration and may be counted upon to follow the trail blazed by his predecessor, he has delegated to the local Socialist Party many of the powers wielded by Alvarado. Although it is yet too early to pass final judgment on the many projects launched by the Yucatan government the experience of the last four years warrants one in hazarding certain tentative conclusions, based on a careful investigation recently conducted in Merida and other portions of the state.

The results of this ambitious attempt to raise the social and moral level of the Yucatan shrink visibly when subjected to the acid test of an impartial and painstaking scrutiny. Something to be sure has been accomplished. Bull fights and cock fights have been abolished, lottery tickets are sold only through clandestine channels, prostitution no longer flaunts itself in public places. The prevalence of gambling has been abated, but the greatest social evil of Yucatan, the use of alcoholic liquors continues to

flourish though in somewhat diminished measure. A foreign consul, long resident in the country, who had every reason to be impartial, declared in this connection:

Though nominally Yucatan is a dry state, in reality such is not the case. The Indian gets his liquor—it is often worse than formerly—and it costs him atrociously. Since the state went dry the use of drugs has increased. The liquor business is now chiefly in the hands of agents of the government. This is a matter of common knowledge though impossible to prove.

A recent visitor to Yucatan states,

When the president of the Socialist Party and I were in Tizimin he got a bottle of cane brandy brought in by a friend of his within five minutes after he had asked for it.

In other words prohibition is not enforced in anything like the thorough-going manner it is in Sonora under General Calles.

Educational advance though real has made nothing like the sensational progress claimed by the partisans of the government. Many of the institutions so glowingly described by Alvarado have advanced little beyond the experimental stage; such is true of the Ciudad Maya, the Ateneo, the School of Agriculture and various professional and technical schools. Certain of these schools moreover do not cater to any real needs of the state. In a country where the sole important crop is henequen an agricultural college organized along conventional lines is obviously an exotic plant in the field of education. Equally purposeless is an elaborate system of industrial training in a region where there are practically no industries save the raising of henequen. Nor have the famous plantation schools, so much stressed by the eulogists of Alvarado, proven an unqualified success. Sr. Torres Quintero, head of the Department of Education in Merida, is authority for the statement that the number of rural schools for Indians only, amounting originally to 1200 had shrunk by 1918 to little more than half that number. The chief cause of this set-back has been the double exodus of the Indians to the uncultivated

regions of the interior and to the towns. Again the quality of the teachers has only too often been low although this condition is being remedied as the Normal School at Merida begins to turn out its graduates.

More subtle but none the less serious perils to popular education are the dead weight of inertia and the influence of environment. Though the question of language is recognized as of paramount importance it has been found extremely difficult to confine instruction to Spanish. This is not surprising as few of the adult Indians speak anything but their native tongue. Many of the teachers themselves slip back into the use of Maya. Only too often the parents are indifferent or even hostile to the rural schools and it is found impossible to enforce compulsory attendance. One well qualified observer hazards the conclusion that the efforts to educate the children of the rising generation will be largely sterile unless they are kept away from the influence of the adult Indians.

The real test of the value of the social and labor legislation of Alvarado is to be found in the changes wrought in the condition of the agricultural laborers. The thousands of workers on the henequen plantations constituting nearly three-fourths of the total population presented a problem which the revolutionary government could not ignore if it would. Almost without exception they were Maya Indians, until a few years ago tied to the soil by a system of debt-slavery which few of even the most ardent champions of the Diaz régime essayed to defend. Illiterate, frequently broken in spirit, with the heritage of three centuries of semi-serfdom weighing upon them, they suddenly found themselves, with the advent of the revolution, not only the free citizens of the Republic of Mexico but the objects of earnest solicitude of a government whose avowed purpose was "to protect the weak against the insolence of the strong." About them was thrown an elaborate system of legal and economic safeguards—an eight hour day, indemnity for accidents, three months' wages in case of unmerited discharge. The educational needs of their children were met by schools and libraries brought to their very

doors. Meanwhile their scale of wages had risen to a point which a few years ago would have been regarded as fantastic. If they preferred to cultivate land on their own account the government would grant them patches of corn land or permit them to share in the benefits of the ejidos or restored community property. And lest they forgot their sudden rise in the world glib speakers from Merida would impress upon them their rights as Mexican citizens and would invite them to subscribe to the tenets of the Socialist Party.

What has been the effect on the rural population of Yucatan of this bewildering overturn of their whole social, economic and political status? The immediate reaction was a loosening of former ties and in many cases an abuse of their newly found liberties. Many of the Mayas reverted to type, as it were: certain atavistic instincts long dormant suddenly asserted themselves. To seek for a parallel one must go back to our own South in the days of the Emancipation Proclamation or to Brazil in the critical months following the complete abolition of slavery in 1888.

The character and psychology of the Maya Indians help explain much which otherwise would be obscure. The wants of the Yucatan Indians are few and the trappings of civilization sit upon them lightly. They require little in the way of food and clothing, and the creation of new desires with the stimulus of a greater ambition is a slow and discouraging process. Yet there seems to be general agreement among the best informed observers that the Mayas are good workers as long as they feel the impulse to secure the things to which they have been accustomed. They are not shiftless as are the poorer class of our southern negroes. Unlike most of the Indians in other parts of Mexico they are extremely cleanly in their person, bathe daily if possible, and keep their houses clean and neat. When obliged to labor they are first class workmen. From their forebears who built the marvelous Maya monuments they have inherited certain latent artistic and aesthetic gifts capable of development under a rational system of education. Physically many of them are splendid types

and can handle 325-pound bales of henequen with ease. But with the abolition of peonage many of them drifted from the plantations into the larger towns or cities where they frequently took up vices of the worst type. Others left the plantations for the remote interior. Here they settled on land given them by the government or simply squatted on unoccupied land where they pleased. They would clean and burn over their little milpas (corn patches), make rude huts out of branches and tree trunks covered with thatch, and sow their little crop of corn. The remainder of their time was devoted to hunting and idling; a certain restlessness would cause them from time to time to migrate to other localities and repeat the process.

The bulk of the Indians, however, remained on the plantations where they became a source of endless anxiety to the distressed and frequently harassed *hacendado*. In order to hold his laborers he was obliged to make enormous advances in wages. In the old days the peons received from seventy-five centavos to a peso and a half a day. At the present time they are paid two and one-half pesos and sometimes three and one-half pesos for each thousand *pencas* or henequen leaves which they cut. It is usual for a man to work with two boys—generally his sons. The boys cut off the thorns and the under leaves on the sides and ends and bind them in bundles of 50 or 100. Their working day is nominally from 4 a.m. to 2 p.m. with time taken off for lunch. A man with two boys can cut 6000 *pencas* per day thus earning from fifteen to twenty-one pesos. Even with these high wages the labor supply is both inadequate and unsatisfactory.

The results from the standpoint of the *hacendado* have been unfortunate. Not only has there been a decrease in output in henequen of at least 20 per cent but no new plantations have been set out. Still more discouraging is the inability of many *hacendados* to maintain their plantations to the point of efficiency necessary to prevent ultimate ruin. The typical henequen plantation represents a large investment, whose returns begin only after a number of years. The henequen field sometimes comes into bearing as early

as the end of the sixth year but generally only at the end of the eighth year. The length of time it will remain in bearing depends upon the frequency with which the ground is cleared of brush and upon proper cutting. With due care the henequen will bear for twenty, or even twenty-five years. But if the field is not kept clean and the leaves not properly cut the plant throws out a flowering stalk called the *barajon* and immediately dies. In the days of forced labor the rows of plants resembled a scrupulously kept garden; at the present time the hacendados are often forced to see their plants deteriorate before their eyes, through the indifference and carelessness of their laborers.

Thus a very genuine crisis in the great henequen industry due to the extraordinary labor conditions resulting from the revolution is in a fair way towards developing. The seriousness of the situation is being brought home to the members of the state government and they are making efforts to meet it. They have grappled with the problem from different angles. An endeavor is being made to raise the standard of living of the Mayas on the plantations, to create new wants and aspirations, to stimulate their ambition. Despite many statements to the contrary the high wages have tended in this direction. The Indians have better clothes, better food, and better houses than was the case hitherto; when they come into the towns they demand amusements and diversions formerly beyond their reach. Even the imperfectly enforced prohibition has been followed by good results. The rural schools—in spite of the shortcomings already noted—circulating libraries, coöperative stores, all exert an upward tendency. The present socialistic government in its propaganda in the rural districts continually stresses the dignity and necessity of labor. It is perhaps not unreasonable to hope that in course of time higher wages, a slowly rising standard of living and a general improvement in their social and economic conditions will at least partially solve the problem of keeping an adequate number of voluntary and efficient native laborers on the henequen plantations of Yucatan.

On the other hand it would be idle to gainsay that at the present time there has been a net loss in the efficiency of the plantation laborers. This decrease in their industrial efficiency threatens the welfare of the most important industry of the country and the development of its only exceptional resources. And what is still more serious from a social point of view is the possibility of a retrogression in the civilization of those Mayas who have abandoned the plantations for the back woods or unplanted brush. It is of the utmost importance that the government make effective efforts to counteract this not altogether praiseworthy "back to the land" movement. Fortunately this peril is recognized by the more far-sighted leaders of the Socialist Party now in power.

Another, in this case, direct method adopted by the government of Yucatan to meet the existing labor shortage has been the encouragement of immigration from other parts of Mexico. As is well known this experiment was tried in the form of the famous—or infamous—Yaqui deportations in the last year of the Diaz epoch. At present, needless to say, all immigration is voluntary. According to the statement made by Alvaredo at the expiration of his term as governor, the Department of Immigration of the Comisión Reguladora, had been instrumental in bringing over 8000 immigrants to Yucatan while another thousand were waiting to embark on the quays at Vera Cruz. From 150,000 to 160,000 pesos monthly have been spent for this purpose. The passage of the immigrants and their expenses en route have been paid by the Comisión, but after their arrival they are free to work when and where they will. What with the lure of the high wages, favorable working conditions and direct governmental encouragement it is not improbable that an ever increasing stream of Mexican immigrants will find its way to Yucatan.

Yet, all things considered, the future of the henequen industry in Yucatan is by no means roseate. As already intimated the seriousness of the labor crisis is only partially mitigated by the efforts of the government and certain far-seeing, progressive individuals. But even should an ade-

quate supply of labor be made available the plight of the henequeneros would still be critical. During the past few years almost no new planting has been done; when the new plantations now giving their maximum yield cease bearing some five or ten years hence there will take place a startling decrease in production. Again it is not improbable that the profound social and economic transformation through which Yucatan has been passing has permanently deprived her of the exceptional advantages she has up to this time enjoyed in the production of henequen. As a result of the increased cost of raising and marketing under the new labor conditions produced by the revolution there is good ground for the belief that Cuba, and certain districts of Mexico—notably the West Coast—can compete on at least an equal basis with Yucatan.

The effect of the recent social and labor legislation on other classes of the population of Yucatan calls for only a brief discussion. In a number of districts where transportation difficulties render the production of henequen impossible a certain amount of corn is raised by small farmers working little plots or milpas of their own, or at least in their personal possession. Some of these are in the hands of Mayas who were formerly peons on the henequen plantations. Up until recently these farmers have been bled by a class of middlemen who were wont to pay them one-third of the value of the corn offered for sale. This abuse is in a fair way towards being remedied by the efforts of the Socialist Party which is establishing a coöperative selling organization known as the Liga Resistencia.

In the urban centers of Yucatan labor enjoys the same relatively high remuneration as do the peons on the plantations. The same is true of the employees of the railroads. There are various industrial unions—coach-men, stevedores, restaurant waiters, railway men, etc. They have been quick to recognize the possibilities of the labor law and in most contests with their employers have emerged victorious. Strikes have been resorted to from time to time but it is generally more profitable and expeditious to lay their grievances before the Comisión de Arbitraje or Arbitration Com-

mission. This body is composed of five persons, two representatives of labor, two of capital and one appointed by the governor of the state. In reality, however—at least at the present time—all five members usually belong to the Socialist Party. Decisions are reached quickly and are almost invariably in favor of the laborers. “We settled the stevedore’s strike in an hour and a half” the president of the Socialist Party recently informed a visitor to Merida.

Why take longer? We are wise to the long investigations and reports that obscure the issue in the United States in similar cases. We want justice, not a lot of legal procedure.

A source of endless exasperation to the employer is the provision of the labor law awarding the laborer three months’ salary in case of unmerited discharge. Even in cases of the most flagrant incompetency or dishonesty on the part of the employee his claim is almost certain to be sustained by the *Comisión de Arbitraje* or the courts. Certain of the more provident employers insist that every person sign a paper before he is hired handing in his resignation from the position he has taken. In this way the employer is afforded a certain protection.

While it is yet too early to pass final judgment on the comprehensive scheme of social and economic reforms introduced into Yucatan by Alvarado it cannot be denied that those immediately benefited have been the members of the laboring classes. From the standpoint both of material comfort and wages they are obviously better off than under the Diaz régime—this despite the enormous advance in the cost of living. Yet in the final instance one cannot but detect something artificial and transitory in this utopia of the Yucatan wage-earners. They have been the beneficiaries of a social revolution for whose advent they were in no wise responsible and in whose guidance—until recently, at least—they have had no share. Even the most enthusiastic champions of Governor Alvarado admit that his measures have been highly dictatorial and arbitrary, glossed over with the thinnest veneer of constitutionalism. In seeking for parallels one instinctively

turns to the so-called enlightened despots of the eighteenth century. And with the passing of Alvarado's dictatorship, the control of affairs has come into the hands of the Socialist Party the great proportion of whose members are illiterate and with no training in self government. In fact there exists such a poverty of leadership that the president of the party admits it is necessary frequently to put their political opponents into positions of authority. On the other hand the guiding spirits of the Socialist Party are a band of enthusiastic, intelligent young men who have caught a vision of a socialized state in which poverty, want and crime are entirely banished, and are doing their best to convert their dreams into realities. Among the rank and file of the workers, however, there is little if any realization that their responsibilities and privileges are correlative. And what is still more serious, there is a real danger that the present socialistic régime will place in jeopardy the great industry on which the happiness and prosperity of the Yucatan ultimately depend. The well-wishers of Mexico will follow the progress of Yucatan during the next few years with profound and even anxious interest.